

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello again. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa. And in today's programme we go to New York where a spectacular collection of traditional African art has just been unveiled before an excited American public. It's housed in a brand new wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art - The Met as New Yorkers call it - and it's currently the talk of the town. Our producer Nick Barker has just visited New York and he paid a special visit to the museum to see what all the excitement was about.

NICK BARKER

If you stroll northwards through New York's Central Park on a sunny afternoon and peer through the trees in the general direction of The Met, take care not to get blinded. For there on the south side of the museum is a vast sloping wall of glass, dazzling in the afternoon sun. Ask New Yorkers what it is and they'll tell you with great excitement it's The Met's new wing. Its official title is the Michael C. Rockefeller wing, named after the son of Nelson Rockefeller, the former vice President and New York governor. His son Michael, a passionate collector of traditional art died on a collecting expedition among the Asmat people of Papua, New Guinea in 1961. This new wing is a tribute by one of the richest and most powerful families in America to their lost son. And what a tribute it is. Forty two thousand square feet and a bill for more than eighteen million dollars, it must be the world's most spectacular showcase. Within it is a unique collection of traditional art from Africa, the Pacific Islands and the Americas. Well bearing in mind the controversy that now rages in Africa and other developing countries over the lost art heritage, I spoke to Susan Vogel the curator of the African Department, about the origins of the collection.

SUSAN VOGEL

Well it began as a private collection. It was Nelson Rockefeller's own personal collection that he started forming in the '30's and '40's. By the mid '50's he had become committed enough to it to form a museum.

SUSAN VOGEL

The museum of primitive art it was called. That continued for another fifteen years or so until it became the department at the Metropolitan where we are now.

NICK BARKER

But what about the African collection in particular?

SUSAN VOGEL

Well that was part of the same process. The earliest pieces acquired in the '30's, most of them acquired by the museum really from the mid '50's to the late '60's, most of them bought as works of art, on the art market in New York.

NICK BARKER

Now does the fact that most of these works were acquired on the art market, does that mean that you've been spared a lot of criticism from African governments who claim that a lot of these treasures were stolen from them and hence they're trying to get them back?

SUSAN VOGEL

Well I don't know that it applies very specifically to us more than anybody else or any less than anybody else. Our own policy at the moment, I mean for the last ten years or so, has been not to acquire anything that we don't write to the country of origin about and send a photograph and enquire about the history and origin of the piece and whether there's any problem about our buying it.

NICK BARKER

And have African governments objected to the purchase of certain pieces?

SUSAN VOGEL

No, they haven't. The kinds of things that we have written about and I think that fact that we have been informing them, shows a measure of good will and good faith. I think by and large they are happy to see examples of their own culture on view in the United States. They're happy to have Americans know that they created these wonderful things.

NICK BARKER

Would you like to set up a system of reciprocal loans whereby you could take things from African museums and then reciprocate by borrowing things out again?

SUSAN VOGEL

That would be marvellous. You may remember that we had an exhibition last year of treasures of Ancient Nigeria that was set up by the Department of Antiquities in Nigeria. That was an absolutely marvellous show that was very popular here. Something like

SUSAN VOGEL

two hundred thousand people saw that show in New York alone. That was a beautiful example really of the kind of collaboration that we would like to have.

NICK BARKER

The display of the African collection in the new wing can only be described as breathtaking. As you enter the wing the first thing that strikes you is its spaciousness. There may be a vast number of exhibits but there's no sense of their being cluttered. The colours of the interior cover a spectrum of browns and beiges and the lighting is low. But again there's none of the gloom one generally finds in museums. I asked Stuart Silver, Director of Design at The Met about the challenges he faced in displaying the African collection.

STUART SILVER

Oh the African objects, in particular, were a splendid opportunity. First of all the African collection is the initial thing that greets the audience or the viewer as they enter the gallery. So the initial impression has to be very strong indeed. Fortunately the collection contains a number of very powerful pieces of somewhat larger scale to fit appropriately in the entrance gallery which is very large itself. Over all the African pieces represented the challenge because there's a considerable variety of scale, even though the materials of which they are made are primarily wood and one or two other organic materials and a small minority of Benin bronzes and some silver pieces. But primarily we are working with wood of different styles and on enormously different scales. The task was to somehow relate the geographical and cultural relationships as specified by the curator to relate them artistically as well and also relate them with the exigences of the building as it presented itself in that gallery. The answer was to have a great sort of open court of large scale African sculpture of several different kinds which filled the opening space in such a dramatic way and lighted so beautifully that it is an overpowering impression of style and power and drama which leaves the viewer with that impression through the rest of the gallery. I discovered that psychologically in doing exhibitions the most important thing in terms of a lasting impression of the exhibition are the first and the last galleries.

NICK BARKER

And the first galleries are the African ones.

STUART SILVER

And the first galleries are the African ones. And they're very impressive indeed. As you proceed from the first segment which is a very large gallery, to the second segment which is a gallery of equal plan dimensions but a much lower ceiling giving the impression of a more intimate space, there we were able to comfortably put the smaller more intimate collections. Personally I found it terribly educational as a designer to observe the enormous variety of style

STUART SILVER

in African art though I was not familiar with it. I think some of us tend to regard African art as African art and there's a certain homogeneity to it, that is simply not true. I was able to observe as a specific example the two faced helmet idea, the dance helmet, expressed through three different tribal cultures and absolutely widely different stylistic variations which was a real eye opener for me. It caused me to look much more carefully at African art.

NICK BARKER

If the display and layout of the collection caused difficulties, the problem of conservation caused still more headaches. Most of the exhibits are made of perishable organic materials and this posed particular difficulties for Arthur Rosenblatt, the Met's man in charge of architecture and planning.

ARTHUR ROSENBLATT

Unlike most collections in our museum and I might add in most museums in Western countries, the Rockefeller collection contains more organic materials than we've ever encountered before and specifically the problem was the opportunity to display and make available to the public this enormous number of organic material and at the same time ensure the preservation of this material for centuries to come

NICK BARKER

So you had to worry about things like light, temperature and humidity?

ARTHUR ROSENBLATT

Light, temperature and humidity are the primary problems facing the preservation of organic materials on those particular works of art.

NICK BARKER

Now there's no natural light for the exhibition of the African work is there?

ARTHUR ROSENBLATT

Most of the African work is displayed in areas which have no access to natural light, you're quite correct. In that case we have to provide incandescent and florescent sources of light with ultra-violet filters. In the case of a florescent tube is the sheath that fits right over the tube and that effectively eliminates the ultra-violet portions in the spectrum.

NICK BARKER

O.K. so what about humidity and temperature, how are they controlled?

ARTHUR ROSENBLATT

Humidity is the most difficult problem to deal with in the protection of these particular works of art because we have to

ARTHUR ROSENBLATT

eliminate the possibility of extreme change of relative humidity. What we've done there is to put in a very, very advance solid state control system that modulates all changes in humidity levels throughout the year. So the net result is that over the 12 month period in these galleries, we have a consistency in relative humidity with no abrupt changes. The abrupt changes being the most damaging to the works of art.

NICK BARKER

Now you're using a lot of extremely sophisticated pieces of technology for the protection of the works of art on display in the Michael C. Rockefeller wing. Is it, in fact, all really necessary?

ARTHUR ROSENBLATT

It is necessary in an environment as hostile to these works of art as the New York environment. There are places in the world with the same works of art on display who might not require as much technology. Where there is the absence of abrupt change in relative humidity and temperature. So I think you have to judge it, the suitability of this technology has to be judged and measured by the location where the works of art are being displayed.

NICK BARKER

The African Collection is divided into three geographical categories. The Western Sudan, Guinea Coast and Equatorial and Central Africa. To my surprise, however, there was very little from East or Southern Africa. I asked Susan Vogel to explain this gap.

SUSAN VOGEL

Well the plastic arts from Africa, sculpture in particular which is one of the great world traditions, is mostly concentrated in those areas and the other parts of Africa have tended to express themselves more through verbal arts, through architecture, through body painting and other kinds of things like that. So the whole Eastern part of the continent and the South tends to produce relatively little sculpture. We have a little but not very much.

NICK BARKER

Now you preside over this magnificent collection. Do you have any special favourites or do you spread your affection quite evenly?

SUSAN VOGEL

Oh I have my pets. I have my favourites.

NICK BARKER

Perhaps you could talk to us about some of your favourites?

SUSAN VOGEL

> Well probably one of them is the one [?] stands outside the building on our poster. It's an ivory mask, it's fifteen or sixteenth century

SUSAN VOGEL

and it's from the kingdom of Benin in Nigeria. I love its delicacy, its finesse, its naturalism. It shows a human face with a very serene expression with an elaborate hairstyle. It sort of erupts into a crown that's made up of alternating Portuguese and mud fish, little tiny delicate mud fish. Around the chin is a sort of lacy open work also ivory.

NICK BARKER

Now there's one work that I was particularly impressed with as you enter the exhibition. That is the lifesize Dogon piece from Mali.

SUSAN VOGEL

That's one of the older pieces that we have. That has a carbon 14 date that puts it back to about the fifteenth century which is rare for wood sculpture. Most wood sculpture from Africa as far as we know is probably nineteenth and twentieth century but since this comes from the Salel region which is very dry, wood sculpture seems to have survived there much longer than in other areas.

NICK BARKER

And the fact that it's lifesize, is that unusual for traditional African sculpture?

SUSAN VOGEL

Yes, it's very unusual. I think most African art is very much on the human scale. That is the pieces are somehow related to us in our scale and the space we live in but very few pieces are the same scale as human beings. You rarely find a full figure that is lifesize. Mali is one of the few places where that occurs.

NICK BARKER

Now the gesture of this particular piece seems to suggest some sort of ritual invocation doesn't it? The man has his two arms stretched above his head.

SUSAN VOGEL

Yes that's a theme in Mali land, particularly in Dogon art, that you find again and again. There are a lot of ideas about its significance although I don't think we know very specifically. One theory says that it's an invocation for rain. It's probably a lot more complex than that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Susan Vogel the curator of the African Collection talking to Nick Barker in New York. That's all we have for you this week so until this time next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

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